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SUBJECT: TFGG01: RUSSIA REACTS TO GEORGIA'S WITHDRAWAL FROM
CIS

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Eric S. Rubin for reasons 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Russian leaders have downplayed Georgia's decision to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Russian Duma Deputies and Federation Council members have argued that Georgia was only hurting itself by withdrawing from the CIS, and that neither Russia nor the organization itself would be adversely affected by the move. MFA officials have stressed that they have not yet received official word of the GOG's decision, but have hinted at possible consequences for Georgia. Indeed, Tbilisi's move might resonate more than officials are letting on. Russia attaches importance to regional institutions in which it serves as the de facto leader, and has reacted strongly to previous Georgian threats to withdraw from the CIS. Georgia's decision has already prompted Ukraine to reexamine its future relationship with the Russia-dominated club. The complete withdrawal of one, and possibly two, of its "western-oriented" neighbors from the CIS could chip away at Russian claims of regional hegemony. End Summary.

MFA Awaits Official Word; Will Russia React?

12. (U) Shortly after Saakashvili's August 12 announcement that Georgia would withdraw from the CIS, Russian MFA Spokesman Andrey Nesterenko told the news service ITAR-TASS that neither the CIS nor the GOR had received official word that Georgia would leave the organization. He also pointed out that, according to the CIS charter, member states had to notify the organization 12 months prior to withdrawal. In an August 14 interview with the radio station Ekho Moskvyy, FM Lavrov reiterated Nesterenko's point that no official word of Saakashvili's decision had been received, despite the Georgian parliament's unanimous approval of the move earlier that day. He refused comment until official notification was received.

13. (C) According to Nesterenko, the Georgian leader was "obviously struggling for his own political survival." He said the Georgian leadership was "impulsive" and "irresponsible." Nesterenko also posited Georgia would be cutting itself off from many economic and humanitarian ties that the CIS had cultivated. Russia has made similar implicit threats in the past. When Georgia announced in 2006 that it was consulting with Ukraine about withdrawing from the CIS, Russia claimed that there would be consequences for their relationship in economic and social areas. Furthermore, when Saakashvili announced in May 2006 that he had asked Parliament to review the benefits of Georgia's CIS membership, Russia responded two days later with a ban on the

import of Georgian mineral water. Now, a failure by Russia to react to Georgia's withdrawal could be perceived as a sign of acquiescence or weakness by other CIS member states, particularly Ukraine.

Federation Council Members Dismiss Impact of Withdrawal

¶4. (U) Federation Council member Svetlana Orlova predicted Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS would produce no negative consequences. Despite Russia's history of trying to compel Georgia to remain in the organization, Orlova added that Georgia brought "nothing but scandal" to the CIS, and the organization would be better off without it. By leaving, "Georgia was hurting only itself." Federation Council member Vadim Gustov echoed this sentiment, adding that Georgia was walking away from the many trade, economic, and energy agreements that it had negotiated within the framework of the CIS. Various Duma Deputies, Federation Council members, and the CIS General Secretariat issued similar statements. No official has yet to suggest that Russia take any steps to punish Georgia for its withdrawal from the CIS.

CIS May Not Be Affected, but Will Russia's Image Suffer?

¶5. (C) Vremya Novosti Political Correspondent Arkadiy Dubnov pointed out Georgia did not join the CIS until March 1, 1994, making it the last country to join and the first country to leave. He told us that the CIS would be little affected by

the departure of Georgia, as Georgia had been a rather unenthusiastic member and the CIS a rather ineffective organization. Russia's relations with Georgia were sour prior to the conflict in South Ossetia, and Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS would not make much difference. Head of the CIS and Baltic Center Leonid Vardomskiy also argued that Russia would lose little by Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS. Russia already had imposed an economic blockade on Georgia, Russian exports to Georgia were at the same level as before Saakashvili came to power, and a visa regime already existed between the two countries, he argued.

Comment

¶6. (C) However, even if the CIS is moribund, Russia has always been eager to attach importance to Moscow's leading role in the institution and to the institution itself. Together with the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia sees the CIS as a way of maintaining its dominant role in the region and its influence on its neighbors. In comparison to the events in South Ossetia and Abkhazia of the last week, Georgia's withdrawal from the CIS is seen as a slight blip in Russian-Georgian relations. However, over the long-term it has the potential to chip away at Moscow's regional role, especially if other states follow Ukraine's example and start reexamining their membership, too. End Comment.

BEYRLE